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Falklands War Adds to Stress On Submarines

Aside from the possibility of a massive Argentine air strike, the British had three "wild cards" to worry about in the Falkland Islands last week—the enemy submarines Salta, San Luis and Santiago del Estero.

The Salta and the San Luis, built eight years ago in West Germany, are equipped with the same deadly Tigerfish torpedoes the British used to sink the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano. The Santiago del Estero, though a relative antique built by the United States before 1945, has a range of 12,000 miles between refuelings and constitutes a major threat to the British invasion fleet.

The British concern over the Argentine subs was shared, though with a certain detachment, by U.S. military officials. The Pentagon has spent millions trying to make sure the United States has sufficient and sophisticated anti-submarine warfare weapons to protect our fleet from Soviet undersea marauders.

The full nature of the submarine threat is detailed in a series of secret

and top-secret Pentagon and CIA documents shown to my associate Dale Van Atta.

The Pentagon estimates that the Soviet navy now has 71 nuclear-powered submarines of various types that are also armed with nuclear weapons. They are considered to be the prime undersea threat to the United States.

In addition, the Soviets have 285 attack submarines carrying conventional weapons, and can count on four each from the Poles and Bulgarians. Thus the U.S. and NATO forces have a total of 364 Soviet-bloc subs to worry about.

To combat them, the Allied anti-submarine force has a total of 1,045 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, with an additional 149 in reserve. These sub chasers carry a knockout punch: nuclear depth bombs. They can be delivered by either planes or helicopters.

In addition, the U.S. arsenal includes an anti-submarine nuclear rocket, called Asroc, which is fired from surface ships, and a similar sub-to-sub rocket called Subroc. However, the Subroc nuclear rocket is technologically obsolescent and will be phased out by 1989.

This means, as a Pentagon report notes, that unless a replacement weapon is developed for Subroc, U.S. submarines "will have to rely on the shorter-range, conventionally armed MK-48 torpedo, whose effective use will require [them] to close within

the Soviet detection envelope and within range of existing Soviet weapons."

These nuclear torpedoes and depth charges, of course, cannot be used in any limited war. Their use would surely touch off a nuclear exchange that could escalate into a holocaust. With this in mind, the Pentagon must also look to its conventional anti-submarine weapons.

But this in turn leads to another problem, as a Pentagon document points out: "Because individual kill probability tends to be low in conventional anti-submarine warfare, it could take as long as three months to bring the Soviet submarine threat under control in the Atlantic and the Pacific. During those months, if typical estimates are valid, we could lose as much as 15 percent of U.S. and allied reinforcement and resupply shipping, while the Soviets could lose up to 70 percent of their submarines."

It seems unlikely that either side would put up with such severe losses without resorting to nuclear weapons.

Headlines and Footnotes: What do CIA agents do in their spare time? Go to spy movies, of course. A sign posted in the lobby of CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., promoted "The KGB Connection," a flick that supposedly tells all about the Kremlin's spy outfit. Employees were urged to attend the hush-hush screening.